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THE LEGACY OF JAZZ POETRY IN CONTEMPORARY RAP

Langston Hughes, Gil Scott-Heron,
and Kendrick Lamar



By Madison Brasher

Honors Thesis

THE LEGACY OF JAZZ POETRY IN CONTEMPORARY RAP: LANGSTON
HUGHES, GIL SCOTT-HERON, AND KENDRICK LAMAR

by
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ABSTRACT

THE LEGACY OF JAZZ POETRY IN CONTEMPORARY RAP: LANGSTON HUGHES, GIL SCOTT-HERON, AND KENDRICK LAMAR

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English Department

Bachelor of Arts

Langston Hughes wrote in “Jazz as Communication” that: “Jazz is a great big sea. It washes up all kinds of fish and shells and spume and waves with a steady old beat, or off-beat.” In this paper I assert that the rap music of Kendrick Lamar contains the steady off-beat of jazz and carries out the rhetorical legacy of Hughes’ jazz poetry. By marking the key elements of jazz poetry and tracing their presence in rap music, I will show how these elements create a powerful aesthetic experience for audiences that primes them for the rhetorical messages of the artist. That sort of experience is a rhetorical link that persists in the permutations of jazz poetry from Harlem to present day. The persistent message is the continuation of the concept of “the dream deferred” (Langston Hughes’ term for the unfulfilled hope of racial equity for generations to come), and the ability jazz poetry has to communicate pain and sorrow in ways that provide a sense of catharsis to individuals through building an awareness of a shared community identity that can become a vehicle for social and political change.

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Introduction

*Wouldn't you know
We been hurt, been down before, nigga
When our pride was low
Lookin' at the world like, "Where do we go, nigga?"
And we hate po-po
Wanna kill us dead in the street for sure, nigga
I'm at the preacher's door
My knees gettin' weak and my gun might blow
But we gon' be alright*

When Kendrick Lamar penned the lyrics to his acclaimed song “Alright,” he could not have possibly foreseen the song’s future as the anthem of the Black Lives Matter movement or the massive backlash that followed his performance at the BET Awards, where he sang the lines “we hate po-po [police]” standing on a cop car, with a torn American flag flying behind him. His lyrics were able to resonate and incite powerful reactions from so many because “Alright” is saturated with protest rhetoric. This influential rhetoric is both a testament to Lamar’s prowess as an artist, and the rap genre’s ability to hold counterculture messages that advocate for political, socio-economic, and cultural change. Literary critics Richardson and Scott note the relationship between oppression and rap saying:

A sense of powerlessness to change conditions grounded in complex social, political, and economic issues has led artists to seek ways to express their discontent. Rap music became a cathartic outlet... [and] has become a way for youth to voice their dissatisfaction with society employing the heritage of the Black oral tradition” (175).

Music as a medium for this sort of Black catharsis was not invented by Lamar or even by the progenitors of rap. It's a tradition that can be traced back to the jazz poetry of the Harlem Renaissance. In this paper I will mark the key elements of jazz poetry and trace their presence in rap music. In doing so, I will show how these elements create a powerful aesthetic experience for audiences that primes them for the rhetorical messages of the artist. That sort of experience is a rhetorical link that persists in the permutations of jazz poetry from Harlem to present day. The persistent message is the continuation of the concept of "the dream deferred" (Langston Hughes' term for the unfulfilled hope of racial equity for generations to come), and the ability jazz poetry has to communicate pain and sorrow in ways that provide a sense of catharsis to individuals through building an awareness of a shared community identity that can become a vehicle for social and political change.

Definitions, Assumptions, Intentions

In what follows I will use literary and rhetorical analysis to explain how hip-hop seems to be rooted in the jazz poetry that first appeared during the Harlem Renaissance. To do this, I will focus on the similar rhetorical work being done by three poets in three major of development in African American culture: the Harlem Renaissance, the Black Arts Movement, and today's period of hip-hop culture. These poets, who were and are also performers, are Langston Hughes, Gil-Scott Heron, and Kendrick Lamar. My method will be to analyze one work in terms of poetic form and rhetorical purpose from each artist as well as essays and use criticism surrounding each example to outline a rhetorical form that combines musical and language elements that we can recognize in art form of hip hop.

I have made two choices in the way I do this that I want to explain, First, this thesis will not censor any of Lamar's lyrics even though this is a thesis for BYU for a number of reasons. The first reason is that rap as a genre uses explicit content as a tool to highlight the stark contrast between the White experience in America, and the Black one. Rap began as a fringe genre created for and by marginalized peoples. It provided a platform for rappers to process with their audiences the harsh socio-economic realities of urban Black communities: "Rap music is America's child, born of the inadequate remediation of social inequities," write Richardson and Scott (187). If I censored Lamar's work, I would be tampering with his message of socio-political change. The second reason is that because rap highlights the individual experience, by censoring Lamar's lyrics I would be deeming his perspective—which often pulls directly from his own life experience—too explicit for consumption. Richardson and Scott put it this way: "As offensive as some lyrics may be, they speak the "truth" as constructed by an isolated Black urban youth culture in a land of plenty" (187). Though his lyrics may feel jarring to some, it's more important to consider why they feel that way. Lamar raps contain specific, insightful messages about the Black experience—as listeners, readers, and critics, it's important to listen.

The second choice I have made is to rely on credible sources from the nonacademic publications addressed to a broad, public audience for much of my discussion, though I have grounded the method and conceptual ideas I use in important academic studies. This is because much of the analysis I do is on the affective power of music and the ways it influences the people who listen to it. The nonacademic sources I

use include news stories of protests, music magazine articles and reviews, and artist interviews that are critical to understanding the affective quality of jazz poetry and rap.

I also need to explain how I am using some key terms in this study. The first are hip hop and rap. Hip hop is most often recognized as an artistic movement stemming from rapping, though the terms of “hip hop” and “rap” are often used interchangeably (Richardson and Scott 176). In this paper, “hip hop” will be used to refer to a larger cultural movement while “rap” will be used strictly in reference to musical performance. The term “rhetoric” will be used to describe how the work is describing, constructing, and persuading the audience. The assertion of themes and symbols like protest, individualism, and reconciliation are examples of how rap language is used rhetorically.

Though “formalism” is a term that is well understood within literary criticism, I will be utilizing Kenneth Burke’s specifically rhetorical definition of form in which specific elements of the art—such as rhythm—contribute to an affective experience shared by individuals who encounter it. So, in this paper “formalism” will be used to describe the artistic devices of language that particularly affect the listener or reader in imagination and feeling. This includes the traditional literary devices such as metaphor and alliteration and more musical ones such as meter and rhythm. In the musical poetry I examine, these devices of language create experiences for audiences that are rhetorical in the sense that these experiences are intended to change a person’s understanding of and attitudes toward the matters addressed. By looking at specific elements of this rhetorical form in the works of Hughes, Scott-Heron, and Lamar, I will note the ways these elements are shared with others to create community and socially transformative experiences in a way that is so poignant it perpetuates.

The timeline I am crafting begins with the Harlem Renaissance and Hughes' jazz poetry. Harlem is crucial to understanding how the rhetorical aesthetic of the Black cultural arts developed among the people who gathered there in the 1920s and 1930s. Harlem is where many Black artists, including Langston Hughes, first shared in the forms of art their ideas about what being Black meant in America and what it should do to foster change in America. Hughes describes his artistic purpose to be the cultivating of a new kind of Black identity stating, "We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If White people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too" (Hughes "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain"). Harlem gave Hughes the freedom to explore what Blackness meant on his own terms, with both the beautiful and the ugly shown elegantly and vividly in his jazz poetry.

Langston Hughes

In this section, I will establish what the important elements of jazz poetry are—rhythm, musical motifs, and a portrayal of joy and sorrow—and show how Hughes uses these elements to create an affective experience that is elevated by its proximity to music. Hughes' embodies Burke's conception of rhetorical form as being less located in the artifact and more focused on the collective experience the artifact inspires (Clark 23) by using these rhetorical devices to bring the audiences together in vicarious experienced shared pain and hope. This rhetorical form of Hughes' work primes the audiences to be influenced by his messages of racial pride, "the dream deferred," and the need for change.

To intensify that capacity for influence, Hughes write poetry in a form that reflected jazz music -- a massively significant musical influence at the time. Rhetorically, jazz developed out of Black musical practices that developed in the American South in the immediate aftermath of slavery, both in the sacred music of the church and secular music of the blues. In both traditions, artists expressed the lament that followed the slavery and racism in America and yet also expressed hope. Formally, jazz is highly rhythmic and emotionally expressive of individual virtuosity. The hope is expressed through improvisation and technical ability that moves quickly energizing, adapting, and remaking familiar tunes. Within this sound of play that, in its early years, invited nothing less than dancing, this music was filled with the emotions of racial oppression, a rhetoric of protest, and an insistent spirit of hope.

Langston Hughes used these characteristics of jazz as a way to communicate his ideas about new Black identity. Hughes was writing during the time when a prevailing conception of Blackness did not claim a co-equal place among whites in American society. Hughes condemned this way of thinking in his writings and asserted a different definition of Blackness that encouraged a distinct racial self-definition and pride. He was also skeptical of the assimilationists and wrote scathing critiques on “Harlemites...that were sure that the New Negro would lead a new life from then on in green pastures of tolerance” (Gayle 77). His proclamation of racial pride and critiques of the New Negro are both results of his larger goal: “to reevaluate the political, social and cultural values which had been handed down from the past” (Gayle 74). Hughes used jazz poetry to reflect this reevaluation—he had the option to write poetry in the tradition of canonical

White authors but chooses to write poetry about Black people, for Black people, by utilizing the forms and effects of a uniquely Black art—jazz.

His poetry juxtaposed pain and sorrow as well as exuberance and excitement all at once in the traditions of jazz. His jazz poetry mimics the swing and rhythm of jazz or describes jazz music with the meter of his poetry and the repetition of phrases. This meter and repetition is present in Hughes' "The Weary Blues," one of his most acclaimed poems that describes a Black musician playing "the blues," which is an essential element of Black jazz music. Though the poem describes the blues, a musical genre meant to lament, it also emulates the music in the experience it provides. In the following paragraphs I will deconstruct what makes "The Weary Blues" jazz poetry to provide a foundation for my later analyses of Gil Scott-Heron and Kendrick Lamar.

Hughes establishes "The Weary Blues" as solidly jazz poetry through his use of musical subject matter and rhythmic motifs taken from jazz and blues expressed in precise and vivid ways. He does this first by focusing the poem around a blues musician who plays piano in some sort of a music hall or bar. Hughes further established the musicality of the poem through the repetition of phrases. Jazz music is characterized by taking a melody and riffing off of it, often changing key or tempo but always coming back to the original melody. Hughes does this with the repetition of phrases like in the first stanza, "He did a lazy sway.../He did a lazy sway..." and with the reiteration of "Oh Blues!" or "Sweet Blues!" throughout the poem. Hughes makes the poem musical through the meter.

The poem is free verse as far as rhyme is concerned, but the rhythm propels the poem forward with the meter reinventing itself throughout the poem like a song would.

Though there's no set rhyme pattern but the poem contains many rhyming couplets like "bead/head" and "night/light." What's interesting is that not all of the couples have as tight of rhymes as "night/light." Couplets like "moon/tune" and "key/melody" show that this poem is meant to be read out loud. Hughes himself would often read his poetry out loud to convey its musicality. In 1958 he even read "The Weary Blues" with a jazz accompaniment on television on "The 7 O'Clock Show" ("Langston Hughes 'The Weary Blues'"). This embodies a characteristic of jazz poetry, oration, which connects Hughes both to the oral roots of Black spirituals and the future developments of jazz poetry, hip hop. Beyond rhythm alone, the music and poetry feature the skill of expression of the artist that creates intense, imaginative experiences in the audience.

The meter and alliteration within the poem emphasize the dominant characteristic of jazz poetry: rhythm. American Black music has evolved from its African roots to include many different styles such as funk, gospel, jazz, and hip hop. All of these are characterized by a dominating sense of rhythm. Jazz and jazz poetry perpetuate this characteristic through a strong central beat that grounds the other musicians as they improvise. Jazz poetry allows for a flexible meter as it draws from music that encourages syncopation, or accenting the upbeat: "Blues singers have free reign to insert unstressed syllables between the musical beats and, conversely, to draw out a single word or syllable melodically over several beats" (Huang 11-12). Hughes establishes a beat throughout his poem. He begins by stating the musician is "rocking back and forth to a mellow croon." This initial line sets a precedent that leads the reader to sway along to the rhythm Hughes creates in the rest of the poem. Hughes makes similar statements after this that keep the reader swaying such as "He did a lazy sway" in the first stanza, "Swaying to and

for on his rickety stool” in the second, and the “thump, thump, thump, went his foot on the floor” in the last. These statements in each stanza provide the base that Hughes riffs off of just like a jazz trio would. Hughes also establishes rhythm within lines with alliteration. One example of this is Hughes’ first line where he states, “Droning a drowsy syncopated tune.” “Droning” and “drowsy” help establish the beat the Hughes uses throughout. Hughes writes with a strong sense of rhythm in “The Weary Blues” both on a smaller scale with alliteration and on a larger one with his description of the musician’s swaying which places his work in a long line of Black musical tradition.

What does the experience of this establishment of rhythm encourage? Kenneth Burke’s writings on form as a collective experience defined by the vivid images an artist creates through virtuosity saying: “The appeal of form [is] exemplified in rhythm...A rhythm is a promise which the poet makes to the reader—and in proportion as the reader comes to rely on the promise, he falls into a state of general surrender which makes him more likely to accept without resistance the rest of the poet’s material” (Burke 141). In “The Weary Blues” both the musician *and* the reader are swaying together. This collective aesthetic experience Hughes creates is encouraged by the sense of rhythm the reader and the musician feels in “The Weary Blues.” This is an aesthetic experience, individually felt, that is indicative of jazz itself in the communal nature of a jazz performance: “At its best, the experience shared by a jazz audience feels like a kind of communion, a renewal of commitment and conviction that people really can... ‘get along’” (Clark 23). By inviting the reader into the music hall—into the musician’s art, the reader is rendered open to Hughes’ rhetorical message to “get along” or form a sense of community that embraces the joy and sorrow that comes with being Black in America.

In an essay about jazz, Hughes described jazz as “a montage of a dream deferred. A great big dream—yet to come—and always *yet*—to become ultimately and finally true.” The “dream deferred” expresses hoping of a future of acceptance and equality that is not available to the Black Americans at this time (Hughes “Jazz as Communication”). This mixed feeling of despair and hope permeate “The Weary Blues.” The musician Hughes’ describes is haggard and worn down. Hughes sets a melancholy tone with descriptions like “by the pale dull pallor of an old gas light” that are further saddened by the words of the musician: “Ain’t for nobody in all this world/Ain’t got nobody but ma self.” This sadness is peppered with exclamations like “O Blues!” and “Sweet Blues!” that juxtapose the musician’s words and circumstance. This combination of deep sadness and the joys of music embody the “dream deferred” dynamic perfectly. Though the musician’s life has hardship, he can turn to the blues.

Hughes expands the role of the musician by stating that the musician’s troubles are “coming from a Black man’s soul, presenting the musician’s experience as expressing African American experience in general. Here, the musician becomes an everyman and starts representing the Black man’s experience. Jazz poetry becomes the perfect vehicle to express the sorrow that comes with being Black in America. Hughes’ touches on this here with the outright declaration of the musician as a “Negro,” the aforementioned “Black man’s soul,” and the subtler, “With his ebony hands on each ivory key/ He made that poor piano moan with melody.” This first line emphasizes the disconnect between the Black man’s world and the White. Hughes’ was writing poetry in an America filled with segregation. The “blues” pouring out of this man is one born out of oppression, a sound only available to the Black man. Music in this poem not only acts as a literary

device for Hughes' but a medium—perhaps the only medium available—to express pain. Hughes writes of this in his essay “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” stating: “But jazz to me is one of the inherent expressions of Negro life in America; the eternal tom-tom beating in the Negro soul—the tom-tom of revolt against weariness in a White world, a world of subway trains, and work, work, work; the tom-tom of joy and laughter, and pain swallowed in a smile.” This quote embodies the unique ability jazz and jazz poetry have to express a weariness within the Black community. This reveals another essential characteristic of jazz and jazz poetry: catharsis.

Jazz has often been used as a medium that facilitates moments of peace—especially in the face of hardship. In *Survey Graphic*, a magazine from 1920's Harlem, J. A. Rogers outlines the purpose of jazz saying: “The true spirit of jazz is a joyous revolt from convention, custom, authority, boredom, even sorrow—from everything that would confine the soul of man and hinder its riding free on the air” (665). Here, it is clear that jazz can work as a coping mechanism for institutionalized racism (“authority”), oppressive stereotypes (“custom”), and limited opportunities (“convention”). This is explored in Hughes' juxtapositions of “Oh Blues!” with the descriptions of the musician's sadness, jazz poetry brings hope along with the hurt. This is expressed in the poem with the last three lines of the poem: “The singer stopped playing and went to bed/ While the Weary Blues echoed through his head/ He slept like a rock or a man that's dead.” Though this may not be interpreted as a happy ending to some, these lines being a sense of finality to the reader. Whether the singer is dead as some would read it, or just asleep, the singer has reached some form of relief and he has done that through music.

Just as Hughes aided in the expansion of jazz to include poetry, he is open to the perpetuation of jazz and jazz poetry in the future. Jazz is the fruit of spirituals which are the fruit of the slave songs. Hughes notes this history and utilizes his abstract concept of jazz stating that: “Jazz is a great big sea. It washes up all kinds of fish and shells and spume and waves with a steady old beat, or off-beat.” In this statement, the “steady old beat” references the musical history embedded in jazz and jazz poetry. Hughes is aware that jazz is the current embodiment of a medium to express the “deferred dream”—and that medium will probably change but the spirit of jazz will still be within it. He writes: “That future is what you call pregnant. Potential papas and mamas of tomorrow’s jazz are all known. But THE papa and THE mama—maybe both—are anonymous. But the child will communicate. Jazz is a heartbeat—its heartbeat is yours. You will tell me about its perspectives when you get ready.” Here it is clear that the purpose that jazz fulfills is bigger than jazz and music—it embodies the history of a people while communicating individuality. This future child Hughes speaks is rock and roll, funk and soul, and hip hop which will continue to utilize the most powerful elements of jazz—community, rhythm, and portrayal of joy and sorrow—in a variety of ways.

Gil Scott-Heron

In this section, I will integrate Gil Scott-Heron to the lineage of this jazz poetry rhetorical form by marking the rhetorical devices at play in his famous song/poem, “The Revolution will not be Televised”. His contribution to jazz poetry is much larger than his title as “The Godfather of Rap” as he transformed what jazz poetry could look like in his much looser integration of jazz than the poets in Harlem and what it feels like in his integration of a distinctly Black Nationalist message. He used rhythm and a crescendo of

jazz to change the meaning of his refrain, “The revolution will not be televised” to create an intense aesthetic experience that pushes audiences to “change their mind”.

Years after Hughes predicted the future of Black music, Gil Scott-Heron revolutionized the nature of jazz poetry and influenced the shape of the future with his fusion of spoken word and jazz. He writes in his book of poetry, *Now and Then*, that he is hesitant to accept this title because: “There were many poets before me who had great influence on the language and the way it was performed and recorded...If there was any individual initiative that I was responsible for...there was music in certain poems of mine with complete progressions and repeating hooks” (Heron xiv). Though it is futile to find the exact moment in time when rap was born, Heron’s influence on the genre—though he would hesitate to label himself as a “Godfather of Rap,” a “jazz musician,” or even a “poet” (Heron xv)—is undeniable. Though he didn’t invent spoken word, he popularized the combination of music and poetry and established the capability this music had to share political messages in line with those of the Black Nationalists.

Heron released a number of books of poetry that were put to music in a number of studio albums. He would often sing and recite his poems over a jazz trio using the music as more of a platform than a strict set of notes he had to work with. In the eyes of Stephen Henderson, Scott-Heron’s innovation was inevitable;

In their [Black poets] insistence upon jazz as a model and inspiration for their poetry, these writers were and are confronted with enormous technical problems some of which may be insoluble if they continue to write poetry down. For their model is dynamic, not static, and although one can suggest various vocal and musical effects with typography and extensive use of these rather mechanical

devices may be ultimately self-defeating. Thus, Black poets are rediscovering the resources of their oral traditions and have occasionally been successful with them (Henderson 30).

Henderson raises a valid question—if oration and the oratory arts are so central jazz poetry, at what point is it more effective to just read it out loud? Though Hughes is one of the greatest jazz poets, is it more powerful to read “The Weary Blues” or hear him read it out loud, bringing his poem to life with a jazz accompaniment? I am not suggesting Hughes’ jazz poetry was fruitless. On the contrary, the characteristics of his jazz poetry—its rhythm and use of repetition combined with a powerful rhetorical message—are the fundamentals of jazz poetry that are later innovated by people like Scott-Heron whose song, “The Revolution Will not be Televised” shows Scott-Heron’s relationship with both jazz and rap in its form, as well as its political rhetoric.

The Houston Press notes Scott-Heron’s impact saying: “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised” represents the birth of rap – or, at the very least, its politicized baptism” (McArthur). Scott-Heron does not just create more jazz-poetry, he loosens the definition of jazz while forwarding a political message reminiscent of the cultural movement of his time—the Black Arts Movement.

Hughes was writing his poetry during the New Negro movement which preached assimilation and aimed to show White people that Black people were human too. The Black Arts Movement, or the Black Aesthetic Movement as Addison Gayle Jr. calls it, reacts to the New Negro movement and promotes separatism. Gayle outlines the goals of the movement saying:

The Black Aesthetic Movement dictated that Black literature champions the causes of Black people and encourages them to define their own realities. Like the Black Power Movement, its social component, the Black Aesthetic Movement was not just a manner of being oppositional to the White aesthetic and power structure. It was about building a community based upon a common value orientation, while working toward common goals (Gayle vvxii).

Scott-Heron is irrevocably a proponent of this movement as his poetry explicitly condemns the White power structure and White participation in “the revolution.”

“The Revolution will not be Televised” represents the height of Scott-Heron’s militant-poet era and Scott-Heron’s ties to the Black Arts Movement in its pointed political rhetoric. This relationship became even more overt when the Black Panthers used his song as an early slogan (Barker). The song defines “the revolution” or the fight for racial equality, as something that cannot, and will not, be captured in mainstream media because “The first change takes place in your mind” (Scott-Heron MediaburnArchive).

This sentiment derives directly from Black Nationalists who saw the “revolution of the mind” as a central component to revolutionizing society (Donaldson 14). This focus on internal change as a catalyst for communal change illustrates Burke’s idea of rhetorical form as: “A complex social organization is maintained by a state of mind and that state of mind is constructed out of art” (Clark 138). Scott-Heron’s “The Revolution will not be Televised” is an example of art contributing to communal change. Scott-Heron’s militant activism sets the tone for later artists to continue his life’s work of creating art that facilitates transformative aesthetic experiences.

The lines that define his revolution as an overtly *Black* revolution are: “The revolution will not be right back/ After a message about a White tornado/ White lightning, or White people” (Scott-Heron 77). Here Scott-Heron clearly outlines that the revolution must be fought for by Black people, for Black people. This “militant activism” (Singer) is a distinct departure from the weariness that punctuated Hughes’ “The Weary Blues.” Scott-Heron expanded the definition of what jazz poetry could say with the mainstream success of “The Revolution Will not be Televised.” He took the foundation of jazz poetry that Hughes laid and expanded the definition—jazz poetry did not have to mimic music with a strict sense of meter but by mimicking the aesthetic experience of jazz. Moreover, jazz poetry could be distinctly political and could carry the political message of the Black Arts Movement. The change in form and tone from Hughes to Scott-Heron creates a different experience for the listener that develops a larger definition of what jazz poetry can look and feel like.

“The Revolution Will not be Televised” does not contain the same musical elements “The Weary Blues” does in its meter. Scott-Heron writes in free verse that is not shaped by any rhyme scheme or strict meter which distances his verse from both jazz and rap music: “The lyrics don’t rhyme, for starters, and his meter and enunciation bear only a nebulous relationship to the downbeats ...and backbeats that Carter and Purdie drive home with hard and cool authority” (Hamilton). The addition of a jazz trio’s sound to his recitation of the poem is the most distinct connection to jazz though his use of repetition is nothing to pass by.

Repetition is one of the only literary devices giving structure to “The Revolution Will not be Televised.” The word “revolution” is used 20 times in the short poem.

Outside of the repetition of “the revolution will not be televised,” Scott-Heron uses repetition at the beginning of his stanzas to give the same sense of rhythm Hughes imparts with his repeating of “he did a lazy sway.” For example, the first three lines of the poem begin with “You will not be able...” Burke’s commentary of the use of repetition in aiding rhetorical purpose is just as true here as it was in “The Weary Blues.” In this case, Scott-Heron’s repetition makes his scathing commentary of White America all the more biting. The rhetoric the poem develops through repetition highlights the poem’s greatest strength—the intense aesthetic experience it fosters.

This separation of jazz and poetry highlights the emotional capabilities of jazz. Though the poem is not dripping in jazz outside of its repetition, Scott-Heron’s form creates a different aesthetic experience for the audience that shows the rhetorical capabilities of jazz as a medium. This is primarily done with Scott’s intonation which gains in intensity throughout the song which is mirrored with his jazz accompaniment’s consistent change in key. Scott-Heron’s tone escalates with the music which adds more intensity and energy to the message “the revolution will not be televised.” This passionate, militant energy contrast’s Hughes’ melancholy and shows that jazz poetry can be both. The catharsis provided by experiencing jazz can be a man “sleeping like a rock or a man that’s dead” (Hughes) or one voicing his frustrations about White America.

Scott-Heron paves the way for Kendrick Lamar. Scott-Heron’s use of jazz to aggravate and excite paves the way for Lamar to use jazz in the same way—to make pointed, political statements without apologies. His loose inclusion of jazz in his jazz poetry sets a precedent that allows artists to use jazz poetry in a variety of ways—even in rap. Scott-Heron’s use of oration in his music not only spurs the beginnings of rap but

creates a tradition of combining complex poetry with music—rhythm and poetry (or R.A.P.).

Kendrick Lamar

In this section, I will show how Lamar’s “Alright” represents what can be considered a culmination of the work of Hughes and Scott-Heron. It utilizes the same rhetorical devices as Hughes while depicting a militant activist message similar to that of Scott-Heron. Lamar shows his connection to jazz in his intentional use of flow, syncopation, and intonation to create an aesthetic experience rooted in the history of Black Americans. His rhetorical message of “we gon be alright” highlights the rhetorical form’s ability to create community like in the way it united Black Lives Matter Protestors. The phrase also shows defiance associates with the Black Arts Movement in its defiant message to white listeners, “we’ve been hurt been down before...but we gon be alright” showing the resilience of the Black community in their fight for equality.

Kendrick Lamar is one of today’s most acclaimed political artists. He was the first rapper to win a Pulitzer Prize for music. His album *To Pimp a Butterfly* incorporates rap, jazz, soul, and spoken word and has been described as the “Great American Hip-Hop Album” by many including *Spin* magazine’s Dan Weiss (Weiss “Review: Kendrick...”). Lamar represents a new era of Black art. Jazz is not as popular as it once was. The youth don’t flock to jazz clubs anymore, they go to rap concerts. In the past years, hip-hop or rap, has surpassed every music genre in popularity and profit. What used to be a marginalized genre has now become mainstream. But the influence of jazz is not absent from hip hop (“What Are the Connections between Jazz and Hip Hop?”). As Hughes predicted, the spirit of jazz didn’t disappear, it simply evolved.

The America shaping Lamar's art is different from Hughes' Harlem—the White supremacy is the same but takes different shapes such as police brutality. Lamar's career rose with the Black Lives Matter movement which protests against violence and systematic racism towards Black people. The movement began after the acquittal of George Zimmerman who shot Black teen Trayvon Martin to death in 2013. Two years after this, Lamar released *To Pimp a Butterfly* where he mentions Martin in his song, "The Blacker the Berry." Lamar comes from Compton, California—a city famous for its gang violence and crime. Lamar raps to protest racism he's seen in this atmosphere stating in a *Guardian* interview: "These are issues that if you come from that environment it's inevitable to speak on. It's already in your blood because I am Trayvon Martin, you know. I'm all of these kids" (Lynskey). Here, Lamar's rhetorical aim of his art becomes clear. Lamar's music protests through rhyme, improvisation, and rhythm—which firmly places it in jazz poetry's family tree.

Though Lamar is a rapper, he is aware of jazz's influence on him – he is not just a rapper who happens to be using jazz. Lamar intentionally draws upon jazz to augment and inform his political rhetoric and formalistically to create structure in his songs. In an interview with producer Rick Rubin, he talks about his discovery of jazz's influence on his music during the creation of *To Pimp a Butterfly*. His producer Terrace Martin informed him that the indefinable quality of his favorite beats was jazz influence, that he seems to gravitate to jazz chords and arrangement patterns. Martin told him: "You a jazz musician by default, the way your cadence is rapping over certain types of snares and drums—it's like a saxophone or a guy on the horn, complete with how they hear music" ("Kendrick Lamar Meets Rick Rubin") Lamar's jazz influence manifests heavily in *To*

Pimp a Butterfly. Jazz music accompanies his rapping from time to time, but in the same way it augmented Hughes' performance on the 7 O'Clock show—meaning the real jazz influence happened within the poetry itself through its form which mimics jazz poetry, and its rhetorical message which is rooted in jazz.

The genre of rap lends itself to poetry in both name (R.A.P. stands for rhythm and poetry) and its emphasis on meter and the spoken word. Other genres of music place more emphasis on musicality and less on lyrics and intonation. For example, in rock music, the guitar plays as big a part as the lyrics do in communicating the message of the music. In rap, the music acts as a framework for the rapper to play with and little more. There is less art happening within the bass in the background as there is within the lyrics and intonations of the rapper.

Just like jazz, rap encourages syncopation. Bars, or an eight count create a framework that rappers navigate within. There are hundreds of styles or “flow,” or “all the ways in which a rapper uses rhythm and articulation in his/her lyrical delivery” (Adams), that rappers use that defines their song's aesthetic experience. Some rappers like Migos choose to rap in triplets which gives their songs a rapid pace and repetitive feel (Caswell). Notorious B.I.G.'s habit of placing his stressed rhyme after the final beat of the bar earned him the nickname, “The Flow” (Ex). Lamar chooses no set style and uses a myriad of rap styles and meters which is reminiscent of jazz. The music Lamar raps to is 16 beats long giving the song a 4/4 time signature—a very common time signature. The way Kendrick interacts with the track complicates the meter giving the song a complexity unusual in rap. Sometimes he raps on beat, like when he places the rhymes from the first verse, like “wake up”/ “pay cut,” and “face down”/ “bass down,” on the third beat. Lamar

does not adhere to this flow throughout the song, often changing which beat he rhymes on¹. This shows that Lamar is a jazz rapper in the way he is able to change his rap style multiple times throughout the song. His use of syncopation makes the song feel like it's changing in real time—that he is actively improvising on the beat. This ambiguity in the meter leads to “a destabilizing feeling in the track—an uncertain feeling that complicates the purported message that “We’re gon’ be alright” (Manabe). In the song’s constant evolution, the listener is accustomed to change. This characteristic of Lamar’s jazz rapping allows the listener to let their perceptions of Lamar’s meaning to change throughout the song. The meaning of “we gon be alright” changes drastically from the first chorus to the last.

Just as Lamar’s intonation complicated the establishment of a strict, universal time signature for the song, his constantly shifting intonation shows again his rap style’s penchant for change which shows his ties to jazz. Rap brings another layer of complexity to the traditional analysis of poetry with the different ways rappers stress syllables. In poetry, there is some theory in place to help readers determine the meter of a poem but it’s impossible to determine exactly how the author wants their poem to be read. There is a recording of Langston Hughes reading “The Weary Blues” in a way that is impossible to put down on paper. He reads it aloud while a jazz quartet accompanies him in a way that’s closer to singing than speaking. He exaggerates some words by drawing them out, like the word lazy in “he did a lazy sway” making it sound more like *laaaaaazy*. In rap,

¹ During this same verse near the end he starts ending sentences on the third beat which complicates the 4/4 time signature letting it possibly be interpreted as a 3+2 or a 3+5 structure. See Manabe’s Example 12a and 12b for further illustration.

you always get that complexity that comes from artistic intonation. Lamar in particular utilizes this capability. He often switches into different voices and accents to reflect a certain emotion or expression as reflected in “Alright.” He switches between his rapping voice as shown in verse 1, to a rapid-fire vicious one in verse 2 that reflects his conversation with Lucy or Lucifer. He also switches into a singing voice which at the end of verse 1 is upbeat reflecting a positive outlook and is somber as he refrains his song “u” where he hits rock bottom. Just like how Hughes’ inflections gave the audience a different experience, Lamar’s use of intonation changes the meaning of the phrase “we gon’ be alright” periodically throughout the song, just like Scott-Heron’s gradual rising of tone with the phrase “the revolution will not be televised” changes the aesthetic experience of the song. Lamar’s intonation is more evidence of his status as a “jazz musician.” Lamar also inserted his ideas about Black heritage through the jazz influence in “Alright.”

There’s a reason “Alright” is the anthem for the Black Lives Matter movement. It explores racial oppression while asserting that “We gon be alright.” The song was played at a 2015 convention “Movement for Black Lives” to lift the heavy mood of the participants as the convention was held days after Sandra Bland, a Black woman, died in her prison cell after being arrested at a traffic stop. The song was chanted after convention members prevented a cop from detaining an allegedly intoxicated 14-year-old until his mother could arrive on the scene. The protesters locked arms and chanted “We gon be alright” as they were pepper sprayed. The song quickly became symbolic of the Black Lives Matter movement and was often chanted at rallies and protests (Limpong). The message, “We gon be alright” brings feelings of triumph along with a streak of

rebellion as if saying the Black community can be knocked down but will always get up again to fight for their rights.

The placement of “Alright” within the context of *The Pimp a Butterfly* is important in portraying this message. “Alright” comes after the song “u” which is one of Lamar’s darkest songs to date. “u” enters the mind of Kendrick as he unravels the survivor’s guilt he feels from getting out of Compton and contemplates suicide in a hotel room. The song is emotional and full of conflict as reflected in the two jazz solos layered over each other, playing in the background. Kendrick states in a Rolling Stone’s interview how brutal the song is saying: “That was one of the hardest songs I had to write. There’s some very dark moments in there. All my insecurities and selfishness and let-downs. That shit is depressing as a motherfucker. But it helps, though. It helps.” “Alright” comes right after this, showing Lamar’s perseverance. Though Lamar’s lyrics reflect his personal ability to find catharsis out of tragedy, “Alright” has the ability to resonate with a more general population. The song opens with the line, “Alls my life I has to fight nigga” referencing Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*. This line is just one of many expressing the difficulties of being Black in America. Like Hughes’ musician, Lamar is using the song to express the hate he has experienced and find catharsis. In this song, Lamar is discussing police brutality as opposed to Hughes’ discussion of segregation. Lamar shows this through his pre-chorus where he says, “We been hurt, been down before/ Nigga, when our pride was low/Lookin’ at the world like, ‘Where do we go’/ Nigga, and we hate po-po/ wanna kill us dead in the street fo sho.” Here, Kendrick is discussing disproportionate amount of unarmed Black citizens murdered in America. The futility expressed in the phrase “looking at the world like ‘where do we

go” embodies the “dream deferred” mentality in that even today, equality is a distant future—something will hopefully be available to future generations but not now.

Conclusion

Even in 2019, it seems that being Black can be a punishable offense. The recent protests stemming from the unjust, brutal murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor by the police highlight this fact more than ever. George Floyd showed that being Black and allegedly using a counterfeit bill can be punishable by death. Breonna Taylor showed that being Black and sleeping in your own apartment can be punishable by death. Trayvon Martin showed that leaving a convenience store in a hoodie can be punishable by death. These examples are sadly three of many. The necessity for art forms like jazz poetry and evolutions of it like hip hop show how much farther American society still has to go. I have shown how jazz poetry developed throughout the century and how essential elements of it are present in hip hop, but it’s the need for change that has propelled this development. Hip hop carries on the torch of jazz poetry because it needs to. Hughes’ statement from “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” is just as much applicable today as it was in 1926: this need to, as Hughes said it, “revolt against weariness in a White world” is just as present in “Alright” as it is in “The Revolution Will not be Televised” as it is in “The Weary Blues.” Until Black Americans receive the same rights as White Americans, the “tom-tom beating” carries on and art like *To Pimp a Butterfly* challenges us to do something about it.

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